

## Chapter 6

# The Secret to Independence: A Desire to Write

**A**s I hope you've begun to realize, writing independence does not occur in the primary grades because students have gained sufficient skill in writing their letters or using the frequently used word list, but because they have taken ownership of their writing. Writing has personal meaning for these young students, and they find reward not only in the act of writing but also in all the successes, big and small, that you've built into your writing program.

If you do not yet have the independence you hoped for, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do students write daily?
- Do I allow students to choose their own topics?
- Do I give students access to writing materials?
- Do I write when my students are writing?
- Do I point specifically to what they are doing well?
- Do I provide a daily opportunity for students to share their writing?
- Do I invite students to publish their work on an *individual* basis?
- Do I invite students to coteach mini-lessons with me?

To truly understand the power of these seemingly small structures, imagine the quintessential day for one student; we'll call her Stella.

On the school bus, one of the older girls offers to share her seat with Stella. She has a string and shows Stella how to play cat's cradle. Honored to be sitting with this fourth grader and thrilled to have learned the game, Stella thinks, "This is what I'm going to write about today."

During morning meeting, Mrs. Desanctis tells the students that she heard the loveliest sentence yesterday. Then she invites Stella to coteach the mini-lesson with her. Stella steps up and reads from her work the sentence that Mrs. Desanctis identifies: "My bed is like a boat that takes me places." All of her classmates agree; that is one really cool sentence.

"It's a simile," says Mrs. Desanctis. "When we say that something is *like* something else, we create a simile. Maybe, like Stella, some of you will write similes today."

During writing time, Stella hears a classmate say, "Ask Stella if that is a simile, she's an expert on those."

Stella does write about her bus ride, and during a conference, Mrs. Desanctis reflects what Stella has written: "You wrote about sitting with an older girl on the bus today and how she taught you to play cat's cradle." Stella nods, smiling. She's pleased that her teacher knows this facet of her life. "I especially like this ending," says Mrs. Desanctis: "'I hope she asks me again.' It lets us feel how special this time was." Stella and her teacher discuss how to add some information for clarification, and then Stella returns to work on her writing more. She's eager to revise, not because she wants a good grade, but because (1) it allows her to spend more time with this topic and (2) she's going to share it at author's chair and she doesn't want her classmates to ask the same questions Mrs. Desanctis asked. When adding necessary information, Stella recalls something the girl said to her and she adds the dialogue as well.

After recess, Stella shares her piece in author's chair. When she finishes, all hands shoot up for pointing. Stella smiles as her classmates point to her focus, details, and ending. Mrs. Desanctis raises her hand and points to the line of dialogue. "You added dialogue as well as clarifying information. I think we should talk about publishing this piece. Perhaps you could share it with the girl on the bus."

Certainly not all days are this rewarding for students. There will be days when students choose topics that lack energy for them, you

suggest they make changes that seem *really hard*, and when all the slots for author's chair are filled.

As a professional writer, I am intimately familiar with both types of days. Sometimes the writing itself feels magical and I experience the joy of having created something wholly original. There are breakthrough days when I suddenly know how to fix a problem that's been plaguing me—when revision actually feels fun. There are days when I receive an offer of publication or a letter from a fan.

Then there are the other days—the days that are, quite frankly, more frequent. Days when the words won't come, or the ideas refuse to line up in a satisfactory manner. Days when my email holds only rejection notes from editors and gentle (but brutally honest) critiques from my writing buddies.

Nevertheless, real writers plug on. Why? Because the bright days are so very bright, and because we are members of a writing community. We know that all writers struggle from time to time, that writing can be difficult on some days, but there is always help . . . and the help, the collaboration, usually leads us back to those breakthroughs.

You can provide this community of writers. Your students can be real writers.

What if you do all of the things listed at the beginning of this chapter and still your students seem unable to write for more than five minutes independently? It may mean that in some small (yet perhaps easily fixable) way, they are being trained to be dependent. See if any of the following problems describe your situation.

**I try to conduct mini-lessons, but my students talk, wiggle, fool around—basically everything except listen.**

Meeting times need to acquire a warm, but serious, tone. The message is, "This is an important time when we writers come together to talk about what makes good writing."

This is a hard tone to establish if students are seated at tables or desks. The message of that arrangement is, "I'm the teacher up here conducting a lesson, so you better listen up." One of the first things you'll want to do is bring in a rug where students can congregate and *be teachers* as well as learners.

Next, make sure you spend more time reinforcing positive student participation than correcting behavioral issues. What I often see is a teacher discussing writing but addressing students directly only when telling them to sit up, stop talking, or leave the meeting area.

Initially it will be hard to focus more on reinforcing the positive behaviors you see, but try to turn your meetings around by only rewarding writing talk and ignoring other behaviors. Here are some of the ways you can punch up your positive reinforcement:

- When making observations about writing that is on the overhead or chart paper, circle a student's contribution and put his or her initials next to the circle.
- Say: "Wow, Jason, that's a really good observation. I'm going to try and do that with *my own* writing today."
- Attach particular skills to students. If Aidan pointed out the use of quotation marks, when referring to them again say, "Oh, here we need Aidan's quotation marks."
- Of course there's the ever cheesy but highly effective: "Are you sure you're a first grader, Latisha? That's a fourth-grade observation!"

Before long your students will not tolerate nonwriterly behavior.

**I have conducted mini-lessons on choosing a topic, but I still have students who say they have nothing to write about.**

Do you offer author's chair on a regular basis? Nothing sparks writing ideas more than listening to one's peers' work. Marissa shares her piece on sledding down a neighbor's hill. Her story reminds Nicholas of his snow fort, Tyler of the day he knocked a tooth out skating, and Petra of making snow from cotton balls in daycare. Three new ideas spawned from the sharing of one story!

Many teachers have been instructed to limit their primary students to personal narratives. I know this suggestion comes from good intentions. The thinking is that we are all better writers when we write what we know—that the best details (a very important skill for primary students) come from our own memories. However, accepting or modeling only one genre can be quite limiting. Some students simply do not recognize the gold in their everyday experiences. However, these same students can write fabulous fiction (yes, primary students can write wonderfully inventive stories) or how-to pieces. Many boys will write for hours about their passions, be it tropical fish, monster trucks, or professional wrestlers. One of my favorite pieces was directions on how to change the oil in a dirt bike.

As teachers, we can help students recognize their own topics. When a child comes rushing in to tell us that there was an unexpected visitor at their home last night, or that their father brought home take-out, or that their baby sister took her first step, say: "Oh, that would make a wonderful topic for writing time! I do hope you'll give me a chance to talk to you more about this in a writing conference."

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**I have one student who wants to write about the same thing day after day.**

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Many adult writers have made a career of writing on the same themes. As long as the student is growing as a writer—learning new skills, applying the mini-lessons, revising—I see nothing wrong with this.

With a more traditional writing class, we expect to see students produce a product a day. But there is no value to all of these products if the student is roughly producing the same work—say, five sentences—to meet the daily requirement. A child who chooses one topic and stays with that piece over time is apt to stretch his or her writing muscles.

Some of our young students will choose a new subject every day. Young children are very much in the moment, so kindergarten and early first graders are apt to write about whatever comes to mind first (or whatever emerges, sometimes quite unexpectedly, from their drawings). By the middle of first grade, however, students are beginning to sustain writing projects over days, and some over weeks. The question to ask is: "Is this student continuing to grow? Continuing to apply new skills?" If the answer is yes, then the topic is working. If not, then it's fair to ask the student to choose a new subject so he or she can continue to develop as a writer.

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**I have kids who write only of war, TV shows, or video games.**

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Ah, yes. I had this class too. Day after day a group of boys would draw pictures of guns or bombs blasting. These were not kids whose parents had gone to war, nor was it because wartime images were flashing on their TV screens at night, but they loved drawing these images in the same way they loved playing with toys that resembled guns. Their writing had become an extension of pretend play.

And yes, each year I have more and more students who want to retell the plots of movie and TV shows or re-create the action of a video game. The problem with these topics is that they're virtual—one

dimensional—and it's almost impossible to help young students who choose these topics to grow as writers. The guns blast, the character moves from one level to the next—beginning, middle, and end of story.

I've also found that students who write about the things they see on screens do not have a genuine understanding of what their reading audience requires to comprehend their piece. I once tried to conference with a child who wrote about a TV show that had "twenty-six ladies who have suitcases." I tried my best to understand:

"Where are the women going?"

"Nowhere."

"Nowhere? Why do they have suitcases?"

"They're supposed to."

Of course I howled when I finally had the opportunity to watch the show: *Deal or No Deal*.

So I suggest the rule, "No writing about violence or something you've seen on a screen." You can tell students that (1) you can't help them grow as writers when they write about something virtual and (2) anything that makes others uncomfortable (violence, profanity, bathroom talk) is not an acceptable school topic choice.

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**My students are unable to "stretch out" words without me.**

I've often observed primary teachers saying the needed word very slowly, over and over again, allowing the student to hear each separate sound. If a sound (typically a vowel sound) isn't heard, the teacher will go back and make the sound again. Before long, students feel they need the teacher in order to hear all the phonemes correctly.

Instead, have *students* say the word. Then ask, "What sounds do you hear?" When they tell you the sounds and record the letters that make those sounds, nod your head and move on. Do not try to help them to identify the phonemes they're not hearing. This is a developmental process. The more they practice (without you) the better they'll get at stretching words.

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**My students still want me to spell words for them.**

This is a hard habit to break, but in order to do so you must be incredibly consistent. What often happens is that a teacher will announce to the class, "Please do not ask me for spellings. I want you to record the sounds you hear." Then, distracted, she'll walk by a student who asks, "How do you spell *Jersey*?" and before you know it, she's provided all six letters.

You can't. You simply can't spell *any* word. Not even if it's a difficult word, a word all your students should know, or the only word that particular student will need to create a practically perfect piece.

You can say, however:

- Record the sounds you hear
- Check your word list
- Look up at the word wall
- Circle it and we'll find the spelling later

These suggestions all help students build independence as they're writing.

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**What do I do with students who are developmentally young or need a great deal of writing assistance?**

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Herein lies the beauty of writer's workshop: It allows us to truly differentiate. Each child works at his or her own level. Some children are drawing and scribbling, while others are writing paragraphs.

Nevertheless, as teachers we are acutely aware of the varying needs and often feel pulled in many directions at once. How will Justin learn his letters if we don't sit down beside him? And how long will Nicole work before she's flitting around the room disrupting others?

I often choose to invite children to work beside me at the conference table. I don't use this as a punishment. Instead I might say to the student, "Justin, I'd love to help you with your letters today. Would you sit beside me so I can work with you more often?" Then while waiting for each new student to pull together his or her story for a conference, I lean over and help Justin identify another letter-sound combination. (If the student can remain focused and honor the needs of other writers, I might send him on a "letter interview." Having just taught him the sound of the letter /, I'll suggest he interview classmates for words that begin with this letter. He then draws a picture of each response on his letter page.)

I'll also extend an invitation to the child who has difficulty remaining on task. While at the conference table, she'll often stop writing to listen to the conversation, but I'd rather she listen to writing instruction than interrupt her busy classmates.

And it's essential, of course, that we find many opportunities for these students to coteach mini-lessons, participate in author's chair, and publish their work. All writers require an audience.

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**What do I say to students who want to write together?**

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I usually say, "Yes, for one go." Writers of all ages learn when they collaborate. And for students who have difficulty recording text or staying focused, a partner often makes an enormous difference. However, I do ask that students collaborate on one project only. Why? Because over time, partnerships form patterns that stilt growth: One child provides all the ideas, while the other is always the scribe.

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**I have students who are capable but will waste an entire writing period without getting anything down.**

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This is where the date stamp comes in handy. With it I can easily see what has been produced at the end of each day.

First question the student to see if there is a legitimate reason why he or she is not writing. I once had a student burst into tears. His family was in crisis, and he had been told not to tell anyone. He was afraid to write for fear of revealing the only thing that was on his mind.

Perhaps the student has trouble with transitions and therefore stops writing each and every time he or she has to begin a new piece. (Many writers are fine once they've recorded the first sentence.) If so, help the student compose the lead and see if he or she can take it from there. The student with this difficulty usually has greater success when working with one piece over a long stretch of time rather than trying to write a new product each day.

Does the student have good ideas but poor fine motor skills? These are the students I worry about most. Because writing is so laborious, they often decide early on that they "hate writing." It's not composing they hate (in fact, some of these students are my most imaginative); it's the effort of forming letter after letter. Once a student like this reaches third grade, I recommend teaching him or her computer skills. Students with fine motor difficulties often do remarkably well once they have access to a keyboard. But in the primary grades, we need a different strategy. Some possibilities: have the student write part of the period and then dictate additional sentences to you, or have the student tell his or her story into a tape recorder and then later, you type it up for him. And finally, suggest the student collaborate with another student, each one taking a turn at recording their ideas.

And yes, there are some students who simply resist. (Some very talented professional writers will admit to needing deadlines to produce—deadlines with consequences if unmet.) For these writers I



point to the date stamps and simply say, "On Monday you only wrote three words and on Tuesday no words at all. I can't teach you to write well if you don't write. I think you owe me two writing periods. You'll need to stay in for recess to make those periods up." Forevermore the end of each writing period looms like a deadline.

**What do I do about the child who has written very little but expands her story during author's chair?**

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I allow it. This student is showing what she knows—stories need detail, suspense, and voice—before she is able to execute all those words. And she's practicing fluency. She may even be willing to go back and add some of the detail she provided while sharing.

In just a short time, she will become too self-conscious to add on in this way. As she grows, so will her writing, and she will abstain from embellishing.

**What do I do about the student who wants to share but can't remember what he wrote?**

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As I circle around in the kindergarten classroom (or sometimes first grade at the beginning of the year), I ask permission to record my words (in pencil very discreetly) at the bottom of the page so we might remember what was written on that day. Students never mind. Before author's chair they'll come to me and say, "Mrs. Jacobson, what did I write?" I read their work to them and then they proudly share.

In all first-grade classrooms there are usually one or two students, even in the end of the year, who automatically come to me to record their words for them.

**My kids love to share, but a few are shy and others can't hear them. Asking them to speak up hasn't worked.**

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The shy child not only speaks softly but also often hides behind her work. The papers block interaction between the reader and the audience. A teacher I met on the road introduced this idea: set up a music stand. Children place their writing on the stand and project their voices as they read. They can pause to show the pictures as they go.

You can also provide students with a microphone. Speaking into a microphone provides fun in addition to courage, and all students will want a turn.

## Final Words

Initiative, motivation, and self-esteem. These are powerful tools we're handing out to our primary students—tools that will serve them well throughout their school career. And they're a gift we give ourselves. Once your students have grown into independent writers, you'll find that they transfer the skills they've learned to other subjects during other times of the day. Everyone in your class will learn more because you have moved away from being traffic control officer to genuine teacher.

You'll know you've arrived when other adults come into your room and look around. "Where is the teacher?" they'll think. And then they'll see you seated amongst calm, productive students, entirely focused on the growth of a budding writer. I wish you joy in the transition.

## Chapter 6: A Secret to Independence

### Discussion Questions

- How has your teaching changed as a result of reading this book?
- Have you tried the techniques presented? What are your successes?
- What obstacles have you encountered when trying these techniques?
- Jennifer writes:

*Initiative, motivation, and self-esteem. These are powerful tools we're handing out to our primary students—tools that will serve them well throughout their school career. And they're a gift we give ourselves. Once your students have grown into independent writers, you'll find that they transfer the skills they've learned to other subjects, during other times of the day. Everyone in your class will learn more because you have moved away from being traffic control officer to genuine teacher.*

What are your thoughts about this quote?

- What are your next steps?

### Group Activity

Share the results of the mini-lesson you tried, or present a favorite writing mini-lesson with your colleagues.